Patrick Eiden-Offe. *Die Poesie der Klasse. Romantischer Antikapitalismus und die Erfindung des Proletariats.* Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017. 460pp. €30,00 (Hardcover). ISBN 978-3-95757-398-8.

Literary periodization is a fraught, difficult business that often obscures continuities and interrelations between one period and the next. In this fascinating and well-written monograph, Patrick Eiden-Offe traces some significant continuities between German Romantic thought and the *Vormärz* period of the 1830s in order to provide a "rehabilitation of romantic anti-capitalism." Eiden-Offe derives the term "romantic anti-capitalism" from Georg Lukács's Eichendorff essay of 1940, where Lukács observes that Eichendorff rebels against the "capitalist prose" of life and the "capitalist religion of work"; instead he seeks a more meaningful, dignified, and leisurely form of life (28). Although Lukács acknowledges this socially critical dimension in Eichendorff, he condemns his uncritical idealization of the middle ages. For Lukács, Romanticism lacked the conceptual tools to identify its true (capitalist) enemy, and therefore it became reactionary. This is the starting-point for Eiden-Offe's argument that the Romantic idealization of the middle ages is *not* necessarily reactionary: he thinks it can enable a mode of social critique. This is not a book about Romanticism itself, however. The only German Romantic who gets a sustained analysis here is Ludwig Tieck in his most socially critical mode: the key texts here are *Der junge Tischlermeister* (1836) and *Der Hexensabbat* (1832). Eiden-Offe's book is focused firmly on the *Vormärz* period of the 1830s, which he describes memorably as "der große semantische Verschiebebahnhof, auf dem die politische und soziale Sprache der Moderne sich einspielt" (17). This was the decade in which key terms like "class" and "proletarian" were developed. Eiden-Offe does not aim to provide a left-wing rehabilitation of German Romanticism itself. Instead, his book aims at a Romantic reconceptualization of the proletariat. *Die Poesie der Klasse* focuses on Tieck, Wilhelm Weitling and Georg Weerth in the 1830s, and on Ernst Willkomm and Louise Otto-Peters in the 1840s. Readers hoping for a left-wing recuperation of, say, Novalis will be disappointed (he doesn't even feature in the index). It is not the German Romantics themselves who are to be rehabilitated here, but rather the cultural imagination that presided over the birth of the German workers' movement.

Die Poesie der Klasse explores how the working classes and their practices were imagined culturally in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Eiden-Offe identifies a number of key cultural figures—journeymen, guildsmen, paupers, rebels and Luddites—who

haunt the cultural imaginary of the period. He argues that these romantic, anarchic figures played a significant role in the polemical creation of the working class as a concept. This other "romantic" working class tradition was suppressed after 1848 because it did not accord with the sanitized conception of a disciplined workers' movement. Eiden-Offe argues that the appeal to a romanticized past in the 1830s informed writers' critical responses to the *Gewerbefreiheit* (freedom of trade), introduced in 1810, which scrapped the traditional rights of the guilds by introducing a state-issued commercial license (*Gewerbeschein*) for tradesmen (42). Ludwig Tieck's own father was a *Seilermeister* (master rope maker) and so he was well aware of this reform; and he had also witnessed pauperism in London in 1817. Tieck's socially critical fictions resonate with the anti-capitalist romanticism of early socialist authors such as Wilhelm Weitling, who sought to reform the journeymen's association in Geneva into a modern trade union, and Georg Weerth, who celebrates the poetic qualities of proletarians in his prose sketch "Das Blumenfest der englischen Arbeiter." Eiden-Offe thus shows how early workers' associations were often conceptualized with reference to medieval guilds and journeymen traditions. He argues that if we want to understand the emergence of the working class and its organizations, then we have to uncover this forgotten tradition of anti-capitalist Romanticism.

Although he touches briefly on German historiography (Jürgen Kocka), Eiden-Offe's argument is principally informed by the cultural historians of the British New Left, E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and Eric Hobsbawm, who have shown that apparently regressive traditions can liberate progressive energies. E. P. Thompson has demonstrated that metaphorical language enabled social activists to redefine their own identity: his prime example is William Morris, who developed his own form of romantic anti-capitalism. For Raymond Williams, the modern understanding of culture as "a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual" is only comprehensible as a reaction against industrial capitalism. And Eric Hobsbawm has shown how rebels, outlaws, and Luddites embody elementary forms of political protest and activism. While these arguments are accepted in a British context, Eiden-Offe shows their relevance for Germany. The fact that there is little empirical evidence for such phenomena in Germany is not the point, since, according to Eiden-Offe, we need to understand class struggle not just as an empirical process, but as a cultural one, involving the production of myths about class (333). "Class" itself is understood here as a polemical concept through and through (253). And, drawing on Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, Eiden-Offe reminds us that the word "strike" itself derives from a situation of coerced labor, when the sailors of London in 1768 "struck (i.e. took down) the sails of their vessels" (302). All this leads to the rediscovery that early working class activism involved direct action and more

romantic, emotional forms of "affect politics" that were later suppressed. Thus Eiden-Offe notes that common people have always had to fight, not only for their material existence but also for the right to have higher passions, including aesthetic passions (64). And he quotes Walter Benjamin's point that when modern Social Democrats suppress Marx's portrayal of the working class as an avenging force, they sap the emotional source of the labor movement, since the desire to avenge misdeeds can inspire great personal sacrifice (275). "Class" arises from the feeling that a crime must be avenged. Thus in Ernst Willkomm's novel *Weiße Sclaven*, the revolt by peasants and factory workers is motivated by the desire to avenge the serial rapes committed by the local landowner. And in Louise Otto-Peters's novel *Schloss und Fabrik*, the workers wreck the machines in protest against the inhuman factory conditions. But the Luddites, who used "collective bargaining by riot" (286), also mythologized their struggle through the mythic saboteur Ned Ludd. Eiden-Offe would like to see such romantic, imaginative forms of affect politics and the mythopoesis of the Luddites restored to the historiography of the German labor movement.

Eiden-Offe concludes that if we conceive of the proletariat in a wider, more inclusive sense, as comprising paupers, peasants, journeymen, outlaws, and Luddites, then other, more spontaneous forms of direct action, such as rebellion and sabotage, have always been part of its history. Even the most modern workers are still virtual paupers who, all too often, only have the fighting techniques of paupers to fall back on (320). This is relevant for contemporary social activism in the twenty-first century: given the situation of extreme precariousness in today's employment market, withholding labour through strike action is no longer so effective. Eiden-Offe thinks that contemporary social activists can learn important lessons from the activists, anarchists, saboteurs, and machine wreckers of the past. But he gets his categories mixed up when he presents Ted Kaczynski, the "Unabomber," as an example of a Neo-Luddite (327). This is, at best, inaccurate: Kaczynski used letter bombs to kill people—he was not a Luddite, but a murderer. This points to a more general weakness: Eiden-Offe says little about how violence against machines can spill over into violence against human beings. He admits that he has relegated the reactionary and regressive elements of romantic anti-capitalism in his study (349). But he also plays down the associations between "affect politics" and incitement to mob violence. Myth lends itself to political instrumentalization, and this is why liberal thinkers such as Hans Blumenberg have called for a more detached, pluralistic treatment of myth. Thus, a little more reflection on the risks of political romanticism would have been welcome. Such concerns aside, however, this book deserves to be widely read. It is a rich and thought-

provoking study, one that convincingly applies the New Left cultural historiography of the nineteenth-century working class to a German-speaking context.

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